

ONCE IN A NORTHERN TWILIGHT, By MARY SYNON

How One Shot Out of the Dusk Brought the Hope of Happiness to Two Men and Two Women.

EDITH KENDRICK was watching the trail of foam in the wake of a motor boat far out on Porcupine Lake when Letty Williams came up the corduroy road from Golden City. We had been talking of the sea, Mrs. Kendrick and Constable and I, while we had waited for the coming of the other guests whom Kendrick was asking to the dinner in celebration of Ted Leffen's gold strike at the Missinabi. Hundreds of miles from the Atlantic, up there in the North Country under the caves of James Bay, shut in by the wilderness of the Bush, we were drifting into the old nostalgia for salt water that only those who have dwelt beside the ocean know after they have lived in exile.

It was an ancient chapter with argonauts like ourselves, but always Edith Kendrick seemed to live it with a strange and wistful intensity queerly at variance with her indifferent acceptance of the life in which Kendrick held her. It dowered her somehow with a quality so apart from her husband that there were, those of us in the Porcupine camp who shut our eyes to Kendrick's shady transactions in order that we might hold his wife in our midst.

On that evening, with the air ominously heavy with threat of coming storm, her homesickness for a place and a time gone by overcast our pretense at gaiety until we looked at each other with something like relief as we saw the girl on the road. "She's going to marry Ted Leffen," Mrs. Kendrick explained swiftly, to our surprise at discovering her guest to be Letty. "Bert wanted her asked."

Constable flung a cryptic look at me as Edith Kendrick went to the door of the veranda to welcome the newcomer. We had always guessed that Kendrick staged his dinners for a purpose beyond social amenities, and we had suspected that he was entertaining for hot headed, hard drinking, wild young Ted Leffen so that he might worm his way into making money out of the boy's lucky find in the new camp; but we had never before had Edith's statement of her own passivity in the game. At that, however, she needed hardly to have said anything. That Letty Williams was coming up the tiny path to the house by the lake was proof enough that the affair was of Kendrick's stage management, for Letty Williams was of those whom Kendrick would know and whom Edith would not.

There wasn't anything definitely against the girl, to be sure. She had come, a latter day voyageur, into the Porcupine as correspondent for a Montreal newspaper, and remained as assistant to Cary Connors in the getting out of the miniature weekly which chronicled the good luck and bad, the hopes and fears, the joy and sorrow which make up life to the full in a mining camp. She had chosen from the first to cast her lot with men rather than with women, and she had paid the price of her choosing in a social ostracism which became marked as the social system of Golden City developed. She had taken her sentence lightly, to all appearances, but her very gratitude, showing its face to Edith Kendrick now, showed that the iron must have entered her soul.

"Isn't this a pretty place?" she exclaimed admiringly as she came within the veranda's shelter, paying tribute unconsciously to the woman who had wrought the miracle of ordered beauty out of the wilderness. "And isn't it a lovely view?"

"We weren't admiring it properly, I'm afraid," Edith Kendrick said, slipping Letty into the conversation with that deftness of social skill which always made me wonder what she had been before she had married Kendrick, and just why she had ever happened to marry him at all. "We were dreaming of how the sea must look in a sunset like this."

"I don't know," Letty Williams said. "I never saw it. Ted talks of it often, though. He comes from Halifax, you know."

"From Halifax? That's my town, but I didn't know him there."

"You wouldn't have," Letty gave me a smile which revealed amusement in the circumstance. "Ted didn't have much claim to fame in his boyhood. He must have had a pretty hard time, although you'd never find that out from him. Captain Stratton, though, his partner, sometimes says that—"

"Is that Ross Stratton?" Mrs. Kendrick's voice, modulated though it was, drew taut.

"Yes. He came from Halifax, too, didn't he?"

"I believe so. Has he been here?"

"O, no. I met him in Halleybury. He's coming in tonight, though. That's why Ted didn't come with me. He's waiting to see if he comes up on the first boat from Frederick House Crossing."

I saw Edith's hand close tightly upon the arm of her wicker chair. A little tremor, as if of pain, twitched her mouth, but her voice held steady as she asked, "Is his wife coming with him?"

Letty Williams' eyes widened a little. "I really don't know," she said.

There fell a silence that Constable hastened to break. "I knew a Stratton in Goldfields before the war," he said. "Fine chap. No alloy in him."

"That would be Captain Stratton," Letty Williams said.

A smile, half scornful, half speculative, flitted Edith's face. "I wonder," she mused.



Kendrick was bending over Ted Leffen. Edith stood across from them, her lips tight, her lips stormily contemptuous.

Then, as if she drew down a curtain in front of her emotion, she shut out personalities by a sudden shifting of the conversation; but the gaze of her eyes as they turned back toward the lake, all golden now in the light of the flare beyond the rim of the pines, deepened into brooding sadness which did not lift with Kendrick's coming.

A tall man, of a litheness which always reminded me of a panther, he came out of the house with a soft step which suggested stealth. His smile, affable enough and showing his remarkably even white teeth, never extended to his eyes, which seemed to watch the world as if it were a jackpot. His glance went over Constable and myself, appraising us rightly as stage settings, and rested questioningly upon Letty Williams. Beneath it she flushed hotly for a moment, then controlled herself into a gaze of good manners which strove to ignore her host. "Where's Ted?" he demanded of her at last.

"He'll be up in a little while," she said, and did not mention Stratton. Edith Kendrick shot at her a look which questioned the cause of the omission, but the girl seemed not to notice it, talking to me with a flurry of words I might have found annoying had I not glimpsed the worry in her eyes as she watched the road and known that she was watching for Leffen with more than the ordinary anxiety of a social responsibility. Her relief as he came in sight was so evident that Constable smiled at her.

"To be in love in the North Country in the springtime!" he said with a laugh that was almost a sigh. "What wonders we old timers give to win back that guerdon?"

"I wouldn't want it," Edith Kendrick said suddenly.

"Not flattering to me, is it?" Kendrick laughed nastily.

The straight look she gave him showed that she had not been thinking of him. He met it with careless contempt that had in it the consciousness of power. They faced each other with unveiled hostility as they arose to greet Ted Leffen. Then, just as quickly, with the resilience of long training, they snapped back into their ordinary attitude of conjugal contentment as the boy turned in from the road.

He brought in his coming something of the freshness of a lusty wind, and Constable and I gave him greeting hardly less enthusiastic than was Letty's. Our pleasure in his sudden good fortune reflected, I think, that of the district, for Ted Leffen had never been any man's enemy but his own. Gay, blithe, and hopeful, he had come to the North Country as a free lance prospector. His courage and likability had inspired Stratton, who had been for years a prophet of the Porcupine, to stake the boy. For months he had been hunting along the Missinabi, coming into Golden City only for supplies.

On one of these trips he had met Kendrick, who was always on watch to win the friendship of young prospectors, setting his spider traps for their entrance. From that time the hard drinking which men came to connect with Leffen's name went on whenever the boy appeared. Whether or not he had met Letty Williams before he had started to drink we did not know. Nor did we know whether or not his marriage to her, pressed so casually by Edith Kendrick, would change his ways. All we did know was that Kendrick held him close and that, for some reason, he was using Letty Williams to strengthen that hold. His manner toward the girl revealed his intention, but she affected to ignore it in absorbed attention in Leffen.

That the boy really loved her was unmistakable as he watched her. Pride in her shone in his eyes so honestly that I grew ashamed of my judgments on her. What if she were a weatherbeaten little bird of passage? She was going to give Leffen something that Edith Kendrick had surely never given to her husband. She was getting a devotion that swept aside everything but its own faith. No wonder that Constable beamed on them both and that Mrs. Kendrick stared at the boy and girl as if they were ghosts of a day she had long sought to forget. In the glow of such happiness only

Kendrick's watchfulness seemed baneful; and even that flickered down as we followed his wife to the screened porch which they made the summer dining room.

There, at the foot of the table, spread brightly with the silver which they had packed through miles of muskeg, and gay with the early flowers of that garden for which Edith slaved so valiantly, she slipped into the rôle which she played so often in that setting. Not the homesick woman who had given confidence to Constable and myself, not the unhappy wife flinging defiance at her husband, but the hostess who, with the ease of long practice, keeps alive the spirit of the occasion for which her guests have been summoned.

Spirited, brilliant, charming, she took the bit of responsibility in her teeth and galloped down the road of conversation. She brought out Letty Williams until the girl's eyes shone with delight in realization of her own powers, and Leffen beamed upon them both. She led Leffen on until the boy expanded in rollicking humor. Even Kendrick's keen eyes glistened as the party slid on smoothly. Only once did he show annoyance, and that was when Ted Leffen pushed aside the champagne which the China boy had poured.

"Here's to you," he cried, springing to his feet, "your health and happiness! Good luck!"

He lifted his glass high, and Constable and I raised ours. Letty Williams looked at Leffen in troubled question. The boy bit his lip, hesitated, then downed the liquor. Edith Kendrick and Letty toyed with their glasses. The China boy came back and poured more for Kendrick and Ted. I thought I saw Letty signal to him to let it alone. If he saw her, he did not heed her. Steadily, and as swiftly as the servant followed Kendrick's instructions, Ted Leffen began to drink.

Little by little, led on perhaps as much by Kendrick's sharp questioning as by the wine, he began to boast. We had known that the strike at the Missinabi promised riches, but we had not dreamed of the extent of the gold in the lode until the boy garrulously proclaimed the wealth of his El Dorado.

"It's richer than the Big Dome," he insisted, "richer than the Hollingsworth, richer than any of them, Ken, richer, maybe, than all of them put together." Kendrick's eyes gleamed through the recountal. "But only half of it's mine. The other half's Stratton's. That's what I came in for this week. Going to meet him and turn over his share to him."

"Haven't you done it yet?" Kendrick asked.

"Plenty of time," Leffen maundered. "Plenty of money for us both. Lots for me and Letty. Isn't there, Letty?"

"Oh, Ted, stop talking about it," the girl said sharply. "We're all glad you have it, and you're glad, of course, but let it go at that."

"Going to call it the Letty," he persisted. "Let's drink to the Letty."

"Let's not," pleaded the girl.

"It's once in a lifetime," said Kendrick.

Letty's eyes blazed at him from the shadows that were falling over the side of the porch where she sat, but Edith gave no sign of desire to halt him. Constable, schooled as he was to all sorts of scenes, was revealing a faint edge of annoyance, and I was not surprised when he arose with us, leaving the man and the boy alone.

"I'm not smoking tonight," he said, and followed us to the other veranda. Once out of Kendrick's sight, Edith's spirits sagged visibly. She no longer made effort to roll the ball, and seemed, whenever she spoke, to be rousing herself from apathetic listlessness. Sometimes I had the feeling that she was watching for some one, just as I knew that Letty Williams was listening for sounds from the dining porch. All we could hear was the drone of conversation. Long minutes dragged, and still Kendrick and Leffen did not come, Constable grew plainly worried, while Edith affected to ignore the situation. Finally, driven by Letty's nervous agitation, she left us, going to summon the two men.



"I wish he hadn't made Ted drink to night," Letty said worriedly when Edith had gone. "Captain Stratton will be in before midnight, and Ted should meet him. Ted can't stand it, and Bert Kendrick ought to know better."

"Should he?" Constable asked with sneering innuendo.

"Oh, well," she said enigmatically. "I suppose he can't do anything here."

Her tension tightened as Edith did not return. "Do you suppose Ted needs me?" she asked, held only by her sense of lack of acquaintanceship with the Kendricks, but so pitiful in her perturbation over the boy that I arose.

"I'll see," I said, and went after Edith.

I went through the living room toward the other porch, intending to call the trio there with assumed levity; but at the scene which faced me I halted. Kendrick was bending over Ted Leffen, directing his hand over a paper, literally steering his signature on the document. Edith stood back of a chair across from them, her arms folded, her lips tight, her eyes stormily contemptuous. Not even when Kendrick passed her the paper and she slipped it down into her dress did she abate a jot of her scorn. She stayed, looking down at the boy who sprawled over the table, while Kendrick passed her and went out upon the other veranda. After a little Leffen lifted his heavy head and saw her.

"It's all right," he told her with maudlin emphasis. "Bert's looking after it so Letty and I get half, and Ross gets half. Promised him half, and got to keep a promise, even if he don't need what I'll need. Ross hasn't wife, and I'll have Letty, but—"

"What did you say?" Edith Kendrick's voice cut across the silence with the sharpness of a stinging whip.

"I'll have Letty, but—"

"Are you sure, quite sure," she bent over the table till she had caught his attention, "that Ross Stratton has not married?"

"Why, of course he hasn't. Loved a girl in Halifax long time ago. Said she'd wait for him till he'd won a stake. Married another man. They all do—all but Letty."

"But he told me that—"

She ceased to speak when she saw that Leffen's head had sunk back on the table, but she stood, staring at him as if he held answer to some puzzling conundrum of life. As if she had found what she sought, she turned her gaze outward from him. Then, slowly, as if it were a rite, she took from within her gown the folded document which Kendrick had given to her and lighted it at the flame of one of the candles, holding it over a silver plate until it had gone to ashes. Without another look at Leffen, she went back to her guests. "I think," she said to Letty, "that it would be just as well if Ted stayed awhile."

"I wouldn't mind," the girl said, trying to be brave under the lashes of humiliation, "if it weren't that he's to meet Captain Stratton tonight. It's important, too, something about registry of the mine claim in both their names."

"Here's Stratton now," Constable said, and Edith Kendrick's hand went to her throat as she followed Constable's look and saw a big man coming through the dusk.

"He's not coming—here?" she gasped.

"Why not?" Kendrick asked evenly, though his eyes burned in points of light.

"I used to know him out in the Rand. Haven't seen him in years."

He struck a match futilely and flung it away with a curse. His face lowered in command as he watched his wife, but, without looking at him, she circled the chairs so that she was standing by the door when Stratton came to it. For a moment they looked at each other, two souls so evidently destined for meeting that all the circumstance of their contact fell away until Kendrick spoke.

"Won't you come in?" he asked, contriving to put a sneer into the invitation.

"I'm looking for Leffen," the big man said, opening the door. "I was told he was here."

He had seen Constable, greeting him with

cordiality tempered with surprise, and given Letty Williams a deference which seemed to assuage the girl's wounds. He did not look again at Edith, although she kept standing in his path.

"He's here," Kendrick said, moving toward the dining porch and nodding to Stratton to follow him.

For the instant while he hesitated Edith stood rigid. Then, impelled by swift decision, she held out her hand to Stratton.

"If you had come an hour ago," she said, "I should have asked you why you didn't bring your wife. I have just learned that you had not married."

"Who said I had?" He flung back his head.

"You did, didn't you, Bert?" She turned to Kendrick, who waited, impatient, at the door to the other veranda.

"When?" Stratton snapped out the query.

"Two weeks before we were married, wasn't it?"

"But you knew—"

"I'd heard it somewhere," Kendrick countered.

"Oh, no," Edith said, facing them both. "It wasn't that you'd merely heard it. Bert. You said you were at the wedding in Cape Town. You told me the girl's name, Veronica Mather. I haven't forgotten it, you see. She had golden hair, hadn't she? And a mint of money? And wasn't there ever a Veronica Mather?" She tried to keep her voice light in raillery, but beneath Stratton's steady look it broke.

"There was a girl named Mather out there," he said, "but I didn't know her. I wasn't married then or afterward. How did you happen to make that mistake, Kendrick?"

"I really don't know," Kendrick said indifferently. "Want to see Leffen?"

He opened the door for Stratton, and the other man, without a glance at him, went through. We could hear the murmur of voices from the other porch. They rose into angry altercation, Ted Leffen's among them. I heard Kendrick's disagreeably taunting laugh, and his words: "You're just a little too late, Stratton, after all. Leffen signed over the mine to me."

"It's a lie," I heard Stratton declare, with Ted Leffen's groan rushing after his words. "I signed something, Ross. He told me it was nothing but a memorandum of what I'd owed him for drinks. He's been getting it in for me. I signed it. O, God!"

Even as he spoke Letty Williams was on her feet. "He didn't," she moaned to me. "He couldn't have!" To the blanched agony of her face I longed to be able to give denial of the truth, but the memory of the scene I had witnessed swept over me.

"I'm afraid he did," I had to tell her.

She sprang forward, flinging open the door of the other porch. "You didn't make him do that?" she cried to Kendrick. "Why, it's terrible. It's theft. It's cheating. You made him drunk just for that. How dare you? You'll have to give it back to him, I tell you. You must give it back!"

"You're not threatening me, are you?" Kendrick sneered. "Your memory must be very, very poor if you think you dare do that, Letty, my dear. Perhaps you've forgotten that—"

"I've forgotten nothing," the girl said. "But I don't care about anything in the world but Ted. You shan't ruin him, I tell you. Before I let you do that, I'll—"

"If you care so much for him," Kendrick said, "are you sure that you want him to know what I do?"

The implication of the man's threat sent her back against the wall, but she turned to Stratton. "Can't we force him to give it up?" she pleaded. "Can't we prove that he got it by fraud?"

"We'll see," Stratton said.

She moved to where Leffen sat limply at the table. "Ted, dear," she said, "are you quite sure you signed any paper?" Sobered by the shock of the realization, he nodded

miserably. "I've thrown it all away," he said desolately.

"No, you haven't," she told him. "We're going to fight for it. And it doesn't matter to you and to me whether we ever get it or not. But we're going to get it for Ross Stratton."

Over the boy's face went a wave of despair. "I'd forgotten him," he groaned. "That's the worst of it. I've been a traitor to him. I can't ever make that straight. I wish I'd never been born. What have I to live for, anyway? I'm nothing but—"

Letty Williams put her hand over his mouth. "We're going to fight it out," she told him, comfortingly, as if he were a child. "We're going to get it back for you and me and Ross. Come with us now." But he broke away from her hand, and flung off the porch. Constable, driven at last into action in the drama, which had unfolded so swiftly before us, took a part of his own. "Let me take you home," he said to Letty Williams. She had to pass Kendrick to come to him.

"Don't forget," Kendrick told her, apparently oblivious that his wife and Stratton stood within hearing, "that, if you decide to fight me—I may have weapons—and use them."

She made no answer, but went off with Constable down the path that Ted Leffen had taken but a moment before.

The three of them, Kendrick and Edith and Stratton, stood there in the deepening twilight so silent and so tense that there came over me the certainty that the play which I had thought ended by Letty Williams' going had not yet begun in earnest. I had the knowledge that I was an intruder, and I went back indoors for a parasol I had brought with me, thinking to slip off by the other door. I could not, however, get away from the sound of voices, and so it was that I heard Kendrick's.

"You won't mind, either of you, if I leave you for awhile? You'll find plenty to talk about, I am sure. There's me, for one, and Veronica Mather, for another. Queer I thought you'd married her, Stratton."

"Very queer."

"Well, good-by for a little while. Don't miss me too much."

The slam of a door followed. In the silence I could hear the lapping of the waves on the shore of the lake. A loon laughed somewhere near, and a bat flew by with flapping of wings. Then Edith spoke. "There's no use," she said, "in crying over spilt milk. But—what did he tell you, Ross, that made you stop writing to me?"

"He said that you were going to marry him."

"And he came back and told me you had married. We were fools, both of us, and I've earned a fool's reward."

"Isn't he good to you?"

"Good?" Her laugh concentrated her bitterness. "You've seen what's happened this evening. Well, this is only one of them. For years he's been playing this game, and I've been one of his pawns. I never cared what happened to him, or me, or any one else, until that boy told me tonight that you had never married. Then something I had thought dead came to life again in me—and I burned the paper that Bert had made Leffen sign."

"What will he do to you?"

"What will it matter? What are you doing with your life, Ross?"

"What do any of us do when we're no incentive? Drift along, and pass the time in work."

"Life's pretty much of a mass, isn't it?"

"No," he said slowly. "It's a winding track sometimes, but we come out in the open after awhile."

"We're pretty well into the woods of it now," she said bitterly. Suddenly she flung off restraint. "I can't stand it, Ross," she cried. "I've endured it all these years because I thought you'd failed me and that all men were alike. But I can't go on!"

"You'll have to, for awhile," he told her. "Don't you see what he'll say if you quit now?"

"I don't care what he says."

"You would, some time."

"But you don't know what it is."

"I can guess," he said. As if he dared not linger on the quicksands of her emotion, he veered their talk swiftly.

"Have you known Ted Leffen long?" he asked her. "Long enough to know that he's so loyal and true that his friends try to save him from his one weakness?"

Skilfully he sought to lead away Edith's thoughts from herself while I wondered how I could get away without revealing my unintended eavesdropping, and finally decided upon a bolt through the kitchen and out into the bush back of the clearing. I passed the impassive China boy, who did not even look up from his labors at me, and had gone perhaps two hundred feet through the woods, intending to circle back to the boardwalk a little farther beyond, when I heard the sound of cracking brush and of hurried breathing. I crouched back against a tree, fearful of what might be prowling in the deepening twilight, and I saw Leffen go by, plunging toward the lake. In his hand he held a revolver.

I wanted to cry out, but fear paralyzed my voice. What was he going to do? To kill himself? Or was he seeking for Kendrick? If he had gone to Golden City to get the gun, why had he come back if he were not bent on revenge? Vainly I struggled to call to him, to tell him that Edith Kendrick had wreaked his vengeance by burning the paper which Kendrick had tricked him into signing, but the cry stuck in my throat, and I clung

(Continued on following page.)